

Prophet for Sale or Rent

BALAAM • PART 2 • NUMBERS 22:1-21

Baxter T. Exum (#1587)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
March 21, 2021



****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE****

It is good to be with you this morning! I hope all of you have the elements for the Lord's Supper, either from home or from the table in the back room, as John will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after we study the word of God this morning. And then, following the Lord's Supper, Josh will be leading us in, "Living By Faith" (#400).

Before we begin, I'd like to share a letter from an inmate who is enrolled in our Bible correspondence course program. These lessons we send out are a significant part of our budget, a number of our people are involved in this, and it is a great outreach opportunity. In Hebrews 13:3, the Bible tells us to, "**Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them,**" and that is what we plan to continue doing, if the Lord wills. What I'm about to read comes from Willie, at the Racine Correctional Institute. Among other things, he says this,

In the letter I received from your church, it stated if I had any question or concerns, I could write in at this address with them. Well, I do have a question or two, and this is the reason why I'm writing in. My first question is: Is there a sister church of Four Lakes Church of Christ in Illinois (the Lake County area)? The reason I ask is because I am from Illinois (Waukegan), and when I get out I'm going back. I was looking for a home church and since I'm already working with you guys and or gals why change if I don't have to?

Also, I was wondering, would it be asking too much for someone to pray for me? I have been having a string of bad luck or whatever it is, but I lost my apartment, I lost my job, \$2500 was taken from me by someone who I trusted, I lost my car, I was beat up, and I was sentenced to 14 years in the Department of Correction (6 years in and 8 years out) for selling a very small amount of drugs. I've been locked up for three years now, and all the money is gone, all the women are gone, no one seems to care. "Out of sight, out of mind," is very true. I pray a lot, but my prayers seem to be forced and not as smooth as I think they should be. So, can someone please put me in their prayers?

We have responded with some information concerning the church down in Waukegan (where I've actually preached a few times through the years), but it seems the best thing we can do is remember Willie in our prayers today. And thanks to all of you for continuing to support this good work financially. I know we haven't prayed specifically for our contribution as a church for nearly a year now, but as we give (online or by mailing our checks), some very good things are being done, and we need to be aware of this.

As our tradition has been since the pandemic began, we have rearranged the sermon to include God's plan of salvation at the beginning of each lesson instead of at the end. Whether you are joining us online, on the phone, or here in person, we want everybody to have at least a summary of God's plan of salvation. The good news is: God loved us so much that he sent his only Son to offer up his life for us on the cross. He died, he was buried, he was raised up on the third day, and in response, we believe the message, we turn away from sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as being the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with him in baptism, for the forgiveness of sins. At that point, we are born into God's family, and the Christian life begins. And once again, we have an example. Just a few days ago, Kaylee Culler was baptized in Boiling Springs, South Carolina. Michael Grooms is the preacher there. And we share this by way of encouragement: What Kaylee has done this week, you can do this morning. If you have any questions, if you'd like to study together, please get in touch.

This morning we begin a new series of lessons, based on a request from one of our Christian sisters here in Madison. I'll put the contact information up here again, but as most of you know by now, much of what we study in sermon form goes back in some way to questions or comments from all of you. With 1189 chapters, the Bible is a huge book, there is no way for us to cover everything, and so all of you help me narrow it down, and I appreciate that. If you have anything we need to study in sermon form, please let me know.

Several weeks ago, one of our sisters asked that we look into the story of Balaam and the donkey, and specifically, Balaam meeting with the king and God being angry with that, even though God seems to have given him permission. Well, a few weeks ago I started digging into this, and I suddenly realized why it has been so long since we've studied Balaam: The whole incident with Balaam is rather difficult to understand! As far as I can tell, I've never preached on Balaam and the donkey before, except for as a small part of another lesson on making decisions. And yes, much of what we find about Balaam does teach us something about making decisions. If you are contemplating a major life change (a new job, a move, a new relationship), if you are asking the question, "What does God want me to do?", Balaam has something for you!

But Balaam is an interesting and rather complex character, and references to this man are scattered all throughout the Bible (including one reference we looked at just briefly a few weeks ago when we studied Revelation). As far as I can tell, we have more than 60 references to Balaam throughout the Bible. One author has said that, "Like smoke, Balaam wafts through the pages of Scripture." I would agree with that! I have seen a lot of wafting of smoke the past few weeks! Balaam is everywhere. So, I started with a Bible dictionary, then a Bible encyclopedia, then a concordance (to get the big picture), but most of the references to Balaam are found in four chapters in the book of Numbers – Numbers 22-25. So, I would invite you to be turning with me to Numbers 22.

By way of background, we need to remember that the book of Numbers is a record of what happens during those 40 years when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. They escape as slaves from Egypt, they get the Ten Commandments, but due to a lack of faith on the part of 10 out of the 12 spies who were sent to scope out the Promised Land, God punishes them by causing them to wander for 40 years. This is a group of somewhere between 2-3 million people (very roughly the population of the entire city of Chicago). Well, toward

the end of these 40 years, as they get closer to the Promised Land, the surrounding kingdoms start getting nervous. I think we understand. Today, if we had a group the size of Chicago amassed right on the other side of the Yahara River down by the Beltline, we would start to get nervous as well. Who are these people? What do they want? We are about to be slaughtered!

I'll put a map on the wall up here and try to give a bit of a preview, some things to keep in mind as we get to our passage. As they make their final approach, they defeat a number area kings and camp out in the plains of Moab, right across the Jordan River from Jericho. So, this is it, and Balak, the king of Moab is getting nervous: I've got 2-3 million people camped out in my backyard; this is not good! He didn't know this, but God had told the Israelites not to bother the Moabites and the Ammonites. They were descendants of Lot, and God had promised them the land they were on. The Israelites were just passing through. But, not knowing this, Balak is nervous, and his main concern is economic. Like a teenager coming home for spring break, these people are about to eat everything we have around here! By the way, this is the same conflict between Lot and Abraham's people many years before this. Balak is worried that history is about to repeat itself. The land cannot sustain all of these people.

In response to this fear, knowing that there is no way he can defeat the Israelites in battle, King Balak hires a prophet by the name of Balaam. And Balaam is a rather strange character. He comes from Pethor, near the river (most likely the Euphrates); so, he is nearly 400 miles to the northeast, and this man has a well-deserved reputation for cursing people, and his curses apparently work. He's known for this. People pay him money, and he curses. Thus, we have Balaam, a prophet for sale or rent. He is now the focus. And as we read this passage, I want us to notice that Balaam, even though he comes from far away, recognizes God as **"YAHWEH."** In the NASB, the word **"YAHWEH"** is indicated by **"LORD"** in all capital letters. So, he seems to be familiar with the Lord, the God of Israel. In my mind, I was thinking that Balaam was perhaps one of God's prophets gone rogue, but that is not it. Balaam is a complete outsider, from hundreds of miles away, a seer, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, a pagan of some kind, but he was at least somewhat familiar with the one true God.

With all of this in mind, let's look together at Numbers 22:1-21,

1 Then the sons of Israel journeyed, and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho. 2 Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. 3 So Moab was in great fear because of the people, for they were numerous; and Moab was in dread of the sons of Israel. 4 Moab said to the elders of Midian, "Now this horde will lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field." And Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. 5 So he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor, at Pethor, which is near the River, in the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying, "Behold, a people came out of Egypt; behold, they cover the surface of the land, and they are living opposite me. 6 Now, therefore, please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

7 So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam and repeated Balak's words to him. 8 He said to them, "Spend the night here, and I will bring word back to you as the LORD may speak to me." And the leaders of Moab stayed with Balaam. 9 Then God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" 10 Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent word to me, 11

*'Behold, there is a people who came out of Egypt and they cover the surface of the land; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I may be able to fight against them and drive them out.'*¹² *God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed."*¹³ *So Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak's leaders, "Go back to your land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you."*

¹⁴ *The leaders of Moab arose and went to Balak and said, "Balaam refused to come with us."*
¹⁵ *Then Balak again sent leaders, more numerous and more distinguished than the former.*¹⁶ *They came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak the son of Zippor, 'Let nothing, I beg you, hinder you from coming to me; ¹⁷ for I will indeed honor you richly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Please come then, curse this people for me.'"*¹⁸ *Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the LORD my God.*¹⁹ *Now please, you also stay here tonight, and I will find out what else the LORD will speak to me."*²⁰ *God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do."*²¹ *So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab.*

As we make sense of what happens here, and as we apply this to our lives today, I'd like to make three observations based on what we've read. And I hope, as we move through this, we'll see how most of this applies to the decisions we make. Most of us here this morning would agree that God's way is best. But sometimes we struggle. Sometimes it's tough to determine God's will in a situation, and sometimes it's just tough to do what we know is right. But with this in mind, let's make a few observations.

I. **First of all, I hope we've noticed in this passage that MONEY IS A POWERFUL (AND SOMETIMES DANGEROUS) MOTIVATOR.**

In this passage (in verse 7), Balak sends a delegation of elders from both Moab and Midian, and he sends these men with the *"fees for divination in their hand."* Balaam has them spend the night, and that night God comes to Balaam, there is a bit of back and forth, but God's answer is basically, "No, you cannot do this" [PARAPHRASED]. The next morning, Balaam goes to the elders and explains that the Lord will not let him go with them. Some have suggested a bit of weakness on Balaam's part here. Instead of giving the real reason (that Israel is blessed), Balaam instead makes it seem as if he wants to go but God won't let him. The leaders return to King Balak to give him Balaam's answer, and in response, King Balak sends another delegation, more numerous and more distinguished than the first, and they come with an offer to *"honor [Balaam] richly."* Balaam says "no" again (in his own way), and the answer seems quite admirable (even though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold I still couldn't disobey God, and so on), but instead of sending the men home, he invites them to spend the night, and he promises to check with God again. We'll get back to this in the next point, but for now, it's starting to look like Balaam would really like to say "yes" to this request. After all, he is a for-profit prophet! Outwardly, he says "no," but then he promises to check with God again...just to be sure, apparently. He's loving the thought of that money. And I say this because of something the apostle Peter will write many years later. As he refers to false teachers threatening the Lord's church in the First Century, he refers to them, *"...forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness"* (2 Peter 2:15). So, it's not explicitly stated here in Numbers, but we have more information from Peter: Balaam was motivated by *"the wages of*

unrighteousness.” He wanted to speak a lie in order to get the money. Money is a powerful (and sometimes dangerous) motivator.

And we need to be aware of this - not just in spiritual matters, but whenever we make decisions. Knowing what the Bible says about this, we have the advantage. As God’s people, as those who are living by faith, we are able to see the bait in the trap for what it really is. And so, as we make decisions, money might be a factor, but we are also aware of the danger. And let’s also be aware of Satan’s schemes in this area: If the first offer is too low, he might come back with a counter-offer, he might offer to re-negotiate the contract (as he will continue to do between Balak and Balaam) – incentive clauses and signing bonuses. And it might not be all financial, he might tweak it just a bit as he did here, by adding pride and self-importance to the offer – not just cash, but **“leaders, more numerous and more distinguished than the former.”** We need to understand, then, that all of these things are motivators. We have the will of God, and then we have these other things that might be pulling us in different directions. And if Satan sniffs any hesitation or lack of firm resolve, he often sees that as an opening and continues with that line of attack (as he does here with Balaam).

When I think of making a big decision, I think of moving from one place to another. Few decisions will change our lives more than this one. I think of the situation between Abraham and Lot back in Genesis 13. The Bible says they were getting too crowded, causing conflict between their herdsmen. So, Abraham gives Lot a choice: We need to separate, so you decide – if you go left, I’ll go right; and if you go right, then I will go to the left. Well, the Bible tells us that **“Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere,”** and that is the direction he went. The text goes on to tell us, though, that the land Lot chose was in the direction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and we know how that ended. Even then, Genesis 13 tells us, **“Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord.”** Lot made a decision based only on how green the land seemed to be (a financial decision, for his flocks), but he failed to consider the spiritual situation. And as a result, what happened? Eventually, he lost basically everything – including his wife and the respect of his own daughters. It started with a choice. And I’ve often referred to this when people come to me for advice about making a move. Don’t just consider the salary, but ask yourself: What is the church situation? Is there a solid congregation in this place? How can I serve God when I get there? What effect might this move have on my family? How will this move affect me spiritually? In other words: Remember Lot. And I’m not saying that money should not influence the decision, but still: Remember Lot. Be aware of this.

II. **As we go back to the text, I would make a second observation, and that is: THERE ARE SOME THINGS WE DO NOT NEED TO PRAY ABOUT.**

And what I mean by that is this: When God has said “no” in his word, we don’t need to pray to know what his will is! And yet, isn’t that what’s going on here? God has very clearly said, **“Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.”** Has there ever been a more clear statement in all of scripture? And yet, when the messengers return and ask again, Balaam not only invites these men to spend the night, but he tells them that overnight, **“I will find out what else the LORD will speak to me.”** In other words, I know he said “no” the first time, but let me ask again! And remember: As we find out later (in 2 Peter) this is fueled by money. He really wants the cash. So, when these men return, as he’s dreaming of a huge payout, instead of saying, “No,” he invites them in and basically says, “Wait here a minute while I ask God again.” God, though, has already spoken – clearly and unambiguously. And when God speaks in his word, we do not need to ask. “Dear God, should I commit adultery with this person?” is a prayer we will never need to pray. “Dear God, should I murder my neighbor?” is a prayer we will never need to pray. “Dear God, should I love my neighbor?” is a prayer I will

never need to pray. God has spoken, and when God has spoken in his word, we do not need to go asking again and again, hoping for a different answer.

One thing I am thankful we learned early on as parents is that when we say “no” about something, that is not our opening offer in a negotiation. And I am very thankful that our children understood this from a very young age. I really think it’s saved all of us a lot of grief through the years. When we say “no,” that is not our opening offer. In a slightly similar way, when the word of God gives us a clear answer, we do not need to pray, hoping for a different answer. Those would be wasted prayers – and not only wasted, but offensive. And yet, that is what Balaam is doing here. God has clearly said “no,” but Balaam is asking again (and again and again, over the next two chapters). Like many people, Balaam is wanting God’s way to be his way, instead of the other way around. Imagine how this chapter might have been different if, when the men came back, Balaam had said, “I told you ‘no’ the first time, God was clear in his answer, now leave!” That would have been the end of it. But as it is, motivated by greed, Balaam goes back to God, asking for a new answer to a question God has already answered. It’s not that Balaam didn’t understand the Lord, it’s that he didn’t like the Lord’s answer, and so he harasses the Lord again on this issue.

We are not told exactly what Balaam said to God that night, but I’m guessing it’s one of those prayers where we think we already have the answer, and we just need God’s stamp of approval on it. Have we ever prayed a prayer like that? I know I have, “Lord, I have this great idea, this is what I would like to do, here are all the steps, I’m already on Step 5. What do you think?” Only in Balaam’s case, God had already said “no” quite clearly.

So, as we apply this to our lives today, let’s be careful as we remember that there some things we really don’t need to be praying about. If God has already given a clear answer in his word, we don’t need to pray, asking for a different answer! And this is especially true when the world comes knocking. From time to time, we’ll hear about a congregation whose leadership decides that they need to prayerfully restudy some long-held belief. And it’s good to constantly restudy what we believe on things. But it’s amazing to me that people almost always seem to restudy themselves straight into a position that matches almost exactly what the world is teaching. This is the way of Balaam. I’m reminded of a headline from the Babylon Bee sometime back, “Man Bravely Abandons Unpopular Christian Belief To Affirm Extremely Popular Cultural Belief.” The Babylon Bee is a site for religious satire. But they picked up on something, didn’t they? People all around us are re-thinking their long-held beliefs and changing to believe exactly what the world believes. Surprise, surprise! Like Balaam, it’s easy to go back to God again and again, until we think we get the answer we’ve been looking for all along. Bret Carter is a Christian in Colorado who wrote an article on this (the practice of churches restudying their long-established beliefs), and he suggested that what’s going on in these cases is not really a search for TRUTH, but a search for PERMISSION. This is what Balaam is doing – going to God again and again until he gets the answer he wants. In Jude 11, Jude warns about false teachers, and says, ***“Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.”*** That’s what’s happening here. For pay, Balaam is rushing headlong into error, harassing God until he gets the answer he wants. So, the lesson for us is: There are some things we do not need to pray about. When God has spoken in his word on something, that’s it. And this leads us to what comes next...

III. ...because here at the very end, we find that **GOD DOES NOT APPROVE OF EVERYTHING HE ALLOWS.**

Again, at first, Balaam seems to have a pretty good response in verse 18, ***“Now please, you also stay here tonight, and I will find out what else the LORD will speak to me.”*** But, as we just learned, we really shouldn’t

be asking again if God has already said, “No.” Plus, he invites these people into his home. So, that night, God gives his answer, **“If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do.”** Then, Balaam gets up in the morning, and saddles his donkey and leaves with the leaders of Moab. In the next verse, though, the Bible says, **“But God was angry because he was going.”** We’ll get to that next week. But for now, it almost seems like God says, “Don’t go,” then “Go,” and then he gets mad at him for going!

We have a few ways we can look at this, but this seems to summarize what’s going on here: God does not approve of everything he allows. And I think we understand this in our own lives. Most of us have known people to get married who should have never been married. They are incompatible, but they are in love, and there is nothing anybody can do to stop it. Maybe we’ve seen this at work: Somebody has what they think is a great idea, but it’s not, but they are stubborn. They don’t care about the experts, they don’t listen to the concerns of their subordinates, but they press forward. Ultimately, there’s nothing we can do. Or maybe, as a husband, I’m looking at something – a truck, a gun, a car, a new grill for the patio, whatever – I’ve been dreaming, and planning, and doing the research, I have made the decision in my heart. But, I check in with my wife, and she says, “No.” I harass her again for a few weeks, and suddenly she says, “Fine, go ahead!” Are things “fine” at that point? I’m coming up on 28 years of marriage in a couple of months. Some of you have been married longer than that, some less, some never, but all of us know that things are not “fine” in that scenario! It’s a trap! But in a sense, that may be what’s going on here. God has been clear, but he ultimately allows Balaam to do what he was going to do anyway, with or without God’s permission; but God regulates it, “Go, but only say what I tell you to say” [PARAPHRASED]. I might compare it to some of those Old Testament regulations on polygamy and slavery. God doesn’t approve, it’s not ideal, but he regulates what the people were doing anyway.

The other way of looking at this is to look very carefully at what God said in verse 20. The command is conditional, **“If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them.”** Some have suggested that God knows that the men had already decided that Balaam wouldn’t come, and that they were getting ready to leave early without him; but, instead of waiting for them to call on him in the morning (as God had instructed), Balaam gets up first and beats them to it. He’s too eager. Remember: Jude warns against **“rushing headlong into the error of Balaam.”** That’s what’s happening here. Balaam is rushing headlong into error. He doesn’t care what God has to say, and instead of waiting for them to come to him, he seems to chase them down. But either way, this statement on the wall up here is still true: God does not approve of everything he allows, especially in the Old Covenant.

Sometimes he lets us do whatever we stubbornly insist on doing, even if we get hurt in the process. We think about what happened just a few chapters earlier, in Numbers 11. When the people kept on complaining about the manna, and as they were constantly begging for meat, God basically said, “You want meat? I’ll give you meat!” [PARAPHRASED]. Remember that? What did God do? God buried them in dead birds, three feet deep, for miles in all directions, until they were sick of it. Sometimes, we get what we ask for, even when it’s not good for us, perhaps to teach us a lesson.

In the New Testament, we think of Paul’s warning in 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12, where we find that when people refuse to love the truth, God will sometimes send **“a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false.”** The purpose is not to cause them to be lost, but to make it obvious that they are lost (an act of judgment), so that more people aren’t lost.

We might also think about what happened with Judas. In love with money, Judas decided in his heart to betray the Lord, and we remember what Jesus said to Judas at the Last Supper, ***“What you do, do quickly”*** (in John 13:27). Jesus told Judas to do what he had already decided to do. God does not approve of everything he allows. He wants what is best for us, but ultimately, we are responsible for our own obedience.

Conclusion:

And this brings us to the end of this passage. When it comes to making decisions, this morning, we’ve learned from Balaam, the for-profit prophet. We’ve learned that money is a powerful (and sometimes dangerous) motivator. We’ve learned that there are some things we do not need to pray about. And we’ve learned that God certainly does not approve of everything he allows. So, as we make decisions, it seems to me that we really need to check our motives, remembering what Paul wrote in Colossians 3:2 when he said, ***“Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.”*** Our goal in this life is to glorify God. If the way isn’t clear, go back and check the manual, read the book, check in with a trusted Christian friend, and when the world comes knocking (as it did for Balaam), let’s not get distracted by all of the offers that are made.

Thank you so much for being with us today. Before John leads us in the prayers for the Supper, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God, the God of Israel who spoke to a foreign prophet so many miles away, as a way of honoring and protecting your people. We are thankful for your love and patience with us, even when we stubbornly refuse to do what is right. You know our hearts, and so, as we make decisions, we pray that we would always be open to your word.

Today, we are thankful for Soren’s safe arrival. We ask that you continue to be with Tyler as he recovers and as he faces whatever comes next. We pray that our guests today would have safe travels home. We ask that you would be with Willie today. We pray that you would allow us to continue serving him as we share your word with those in prison.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. We come to you in Jesus’ name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com